

U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Accountability
Subcommittee on Government Operations and the Federal Workforce
Field Hearing, Fort Myers, FL – August 10, 2023

At this moment Hurricane Ian is ranked as the third costliest tropical system to make landfall in the United States behind only Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and Hurricane Harvey in 2017.

As a native of Lee County, I can testify, Hurricane Ian struck a blow to our home like none other, and we will be recovering from the storm for many more months and years.

On Sept. 28, 2022, Ian pummeled Lee County with wind speeds of 155 mph and gusts around 161 mph. It brought 15 feet of storm surge. It destroyed more than 5,000 homes and 284 businesses. Another 910 businesses suffered major damage. In total, Lee County incurred \$112 billion in damages.

The storm impacted every beach, all county parks, and every traffic signal. The amount of debris was staggering – more than 11 million cubic yards of debris countywide.

Some of the most memorable images of this storm will be the bridges on Sanibel and Matlacha that were broken, but the devastation to our infrastructure was much deeper. Within Lee County Government, our largest infrastructure hits were to three departments: Utilities, Parks & Recreation, and Facilities / Construction Management. For example, in our [County Government Damage Assessment Inventory](#), which shows a total estimated cost of \$297.3 million, our Utilities Department alone accounts for nearly 19% of that number.

As with any disaster of this scale, our federal partners were and still are critical to our response and recovery. FEMA, SBA and HUD have worked side by side with us.

As with every process, there are highlights and challenges with each of these three agencies.

FEMA

We were exceptionally grateful that FEMA had a representative arrive to work in the EOC prior to landfall (Tuesday, Sept. 27), and this enabled us to work with someone who could communicate with FEMA's command center directly from our EOC.

FEMA also embedded a Gold Incident Management Team within days of landfall, providing a direct line from Lee County to Federal leadership – all federal agencies from Health & Human Services, the White House, Department of Defense partners, etc. This was critical.

FEMA also stood up a large number of very effective Disaster Survivor Assistance Teams and Disaster Recovery Centers. These were exceptionally productive.

We had challenges with FEMA related to in-the-field communications, lack of inspectors and lack of trailers.

For example, FEMA did not meet our community's expectation for trailer arrival. Some communities take months before they establish a need. We were ready for this help 45 days after landfall. FEMA needs to be ready to mobilize on the community's timeline if FEMA is going to meet the community's needs. And it didn't help that FEMA initially blamed its slow process on our local Land Development Code. This triggered waves of distrust from the public with government and a rift between federal and county collaboration. Finally, given the storm's magnitude, FEMA needed more of its inspectors here sooner rather than later.

FEMA also discredited our local elected property appraiser by issuing a letter advising the county not to rely on his values for making substantial damage determinations. This caused unnecessary panic and a slowdown for people seeking permits.

SBA

We were grateful that SBA representatives were engaged in the community. They attended public meetings, interacted with individuals, networked at events, handed out cell numbers. Anecdotally we know of individuals who had positive interactions and received SBA loans somewhat quickly.

The challenge was that the SBA experience is inconsistent. Many – particularly those with catastrophic loss – were challenged to produce the myriad documents necessary to obtain help. And as local government officials, we were challenged to get straight answers from SBA related to allocations vs distributions for those in need in our community. The SBA is accustomed to reporting allocations as a primary performance metric; but what was needed was proof that dollars were flowing into individuals' accounts. This caused mistrust among local officials and SBA reps and misinformation among community members.

And of course, there was the perpetual SBA challenge with perception – that it's for businesses not individuals. Perhaps it would help to put it under the FEMA Individual Assistance classification.

HUD

HUD provided near immediate on-site technical assistance through the Office of Special Needs Assistance Programs to assist with the consolidation and closure of mass shelters. The HUD field office provided real time support and funding flexibility through grant agreement amendments to provide rental assistance for households leaving mass shelters without a residence.

We are grateful that HUD provided a direct allocation of \$1.1 billion to support recovery in a timely manner and that HUD assigned Aaron Gagne from the Office of Disaster Recovery to support Lee County's CDBG-DR allocation process. Mr. Gagne was

assigned to New York City, which after Hurricane Sandy received a direct allocation of \$4.2 billion. Mr. Gagne's extensive knowledge and lessons learned have been and will continue to be helpful to Lee County.

The challenge with HUD is that in as much as the funding is in response to the hurricane, the ability to disperse the funds in the community takes time and is complex. There is a disconnect between saying "hurricane repairs" funding and having the money arrive more than a year after landfall. Some immediate needs and continued unmet needs are unable to be met using HUD funds due to program limitations such as the creation of volunteer housing. The public – and local public officials – have a hard time comprehending eligibility requirements.

In my opinion - as a resident born and raised here, and a County Commissioner, local jurisdictions are an incredibly efficient level of government when it comes to dispatching resources, in an event as catastrophic as Hurricane Ian, those resources become strained and limited very quickly. This is where we look to our federal partners for assistance. However, there were many moments across many different agencies where the regulatory hurdles, miscommunication, and burdensome administrative requirements were too big and rigid to attend to the community's needs. What was needed was urgency and flexibility.

In conclusion, I'd like to thank you for taking the time to come to our community today. I'd like to thank our federal delegation, especially Rep. Byron Donalds, who helped make today's event happen. Rep. Donalds along with Rep. Greg Steube, Sen. Marco Rubio and Sen. Rick Scott and their staff all have played critical roles in both supporting us and assisting us before and after the storm, and they are here with us for the long-haul.